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ABSTRACT

The book "Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada" by Clarence King, a late-nineteenth-century American geologist, writer, art critic, and romantic, is discussed in this paper. In the writing and revision of this book, King was attempting a metamorphosis of landscape description into popular reading as he moved from being a symbolic writer to being a writer of surfaces, a literary topographer. In this paper, certain themes on the subject of mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada mountains are described and examined, quoting several passages from the book. It is concluded that in the later 1874 edition of the book originally serialized in 1871, which includes a 21-page preface concerned with Mount Whitney, King's literary achievement is shaken, and his power to fuse literary and geological observation is diminished. In the later edition, King no longer looks at the land as filled with vibrant significance but only as a neutral pile of rocks. (TS)

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From Typology to Topography in Clarence King's Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada

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> ...the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?
> Thoreau, The Maine Woods

In the space of two lines Thoreau dramatically moves from the concrete fact of land to its personal significance; that is, he sees the earth as a text, a scripture inspired by God and, to quote another scripture, "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." For Thoreau as well as for other romantic scientists and naturalists description of the earth became interpretation of it, and since the writer was surrounded by sermons in stones, metaphorical language offered itself as the most appropriate tool for a hermeneutics of the cosmos.

Equipped with such an instrument, the method of the romantic geologist and the method of the literary critic or theologian blend, for just as a text may have several levels of interpretation, so may the earth. A recent article by Frank D. McConnell traces the history of the Earth-Scripture metaphor and discusses the romantic's awareness that his own writing as interpretation constitutes a technology which destroys the objects it seeks to name. Once the object is destroyed or if the object never existed in the first place, the metaphorical act of faith either

evaporates into disillusionment or else sinks into hard materialism. Clarence King, a late nineteenth-century American geologist, man of letters, art critic, and aspiring romantic hero, reveals this movement from faith to doubt in his attempt to fuse his numerous roles in his largely forgotten book Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada. The earth for him should have been a heiroglyph, or better, a poem or painting, filled with meaning and waiting for its ideal and refined critic to exploit that resource. In the writing and revision of what King wanted to be a metamorphosis of landscape description into popular reading he moved from being a symbolic writer, a literary prober of depths, to being a writer of surfaces, a literary topographer. It is just this Quixotic quest for significance, in association with its Dantesque form and Ruskinian style which makes Mountaineering such a fascinating and intriguing work.

It is to the 1874 edition, however, and not to its earlier serialization in the 1871 Atlantic Monthly or its 1872 publication, that we must look for the record of King's catastrophic encounter with irony. The earlier work shows the geologist-narrator as a believer in the meaningfulness of the earth, as a heroic discoverer of the land's hidden myths, and as an advocate of a highly controversial cosmology. The later edition, which adds a preface and twenty-one pages concerned with Mount Whitney, undercuts King's previous literary achievement, his confidence in the myth of the land, his heroic place in it, and his power to fuse literary and geological observation. King no longer

could look at the land as filled with vibrant significance but only as a neutral pile of rocks. Like a seismograph, the 1874 edition of Mountaineering records the opening and closing of mythological thinking, the creation and destruction of the hero as scientist and artist, and we are left with a world which once reveals meaning and then conceals it.

This psychological and literary dilemma generally has been ignored by the few critics and historians who have discussed Clarence King or Mountaineering. The great exception is Roger B. Stein's John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900 where the author examines the strong influence of Ruskin on King's, who at twenty-two brought Ruskinian perceptions to the Western mountain ranges. Those perceptions were dangerous for a geologist in the late Nineteenth Century, for as Stein writes, "Ruskin stirred his reader not to identify some geological formation as of Jurassic origin but to sense the beauty, the grandeur, and the sublimity of the scene. He drove the reader inward toward an imaginative grasp of the objective world." It was the hidden lesson and not the classification of earth strata that led King to California in 1863. "I look for lessons," he wrote during this time, and later he defended his profession in Ruskinian terms. "Geology depended on imagination," he wrote, "--who could actually see any deeper into the earth than anyone else?" By projecting his own personality into the landscape, by possessing it, King made geology into a form of autobiography. As long as King perceived land, air, and sea as one cloudy and

fluid Turner painting, he could maintain some balance between his own romantic desires and his duty toward objective description. Then mind and matter were fluid. When he was called to defend his scientific observation, however, he felt only the discrepancy between false imagination and true measurement. Like Ruskin in the 1850's, King in 1874 would have recognized that the "dreadful Hammers" of the geologist chip away at a unifying faith. It was King's own hammer, however, which was doing the chipping in Mountaineering.

This attempt to create what James M. Shebl calls a "psychic West" or what Northrop Frye would call a "topocosm" also is involved with showing both the mental and social effects of catastrophic landscape on its inhabitants. Accordingly, the book is framed with an opening chapter called "The Range" and a closing one entitled "The People." Between these two peaks of generalization undulates a sea of styles and metaphors, the primary metaphors deriving from the theater and from architecture. "The Range" introduces this strange melange of melodrama and tradedy, Victorian gingerbread and neo-classicism. According to King, the history of the earth is a development of geological styles, from crude primitivism through Medieval romance to reposed neo-classicism.

> As the characters of the Zauberflöte passed safely through the trial of fire and the desperate ordeal of water, so, through the terror of volcanic fires and the chilling empire of ice, has the great Sierra come into the present age of tranquil grandeur.
>
> Five distinct periods divide the history of the range. First, the slow gathering of marine sediment

> within the early ocean, during which incalculable ages were consumed.
>
> Second, in the early Jurassic period this level sea-floor came suddenly to be lifted into the air and crumpled in folds, through whose yawning fissures and ruptured axes outpoured wide zones of granite. Third, the volcanic age of fire and steam. Fourth, the glacial period, when the Sierras were one broad field of snow, with huge dragons of ice crawling down its slopes, and wearing their armor into the rocks. Fifth, the present condition....

Thus, the perfect five-act play, a complete Freitag's triangle with rising action, climax, and dénouement. Similar to a tragic hero, the Sierras are purified by dramatic change. Man also is aided by catastrophe, for as King stated later in an optimistic moment, "Moments of great catastrophe, thus translated into the language of life, become moments of creation, when out of plastic organisms something newer and nobler is called into being."

King could modulate from the ampitheaters of Sierra canyons to the Gothic architecture of the Yosemite of Mount Whitney as easily as he could shift from geological description to purple prose. The following comparison of landscape to architecture must have been a tedious cliché by King's time:

> Passing from the glare of the open country into the dusky forest, one seems to enter a door, and ride into a vast covered hall. The whole sensation is of being roofed and enclosed. You are never tired of gazing down long vistas, where in stately groups, stand tall shafts of pine. Columns they are, each with its own characteristic tinting and finish, yet all standing together with the air of relationship and harmony.

The Parthenon, perhaps? Or possibly the cathedral at Chartres, where Henry Adams would try to worship an archaic virgin? This type of description is what Robert C. Bredeson in his article

"Landscape Description in Nineteenth-Century American Travel Literature" would have called "fashionable" as opposed to "informative" and "utilitarian." The writer of fashionable description, like King in the above example, has a paradoxical relationship with the nature which he is describing, for nature is viewed both as inherently redeeming for a jaded observer, yet ironically it needs to be "cultivated" by the same person. Although Bredeson does not mention King in his essay, his condemnation of "civilized" writing can be applied to one important side of King's literary character. The fashionable writer, he says, "has created a scene to which he and those of his readers versed in the convention can easily react, but he has failed completely to represent any sense of a first-hand confrontation between the actual nature and men concerned. He has domesticated the vast and wild--has vitiated its disturbing aspects--so as to contain it within his own experience. And ultimately a failure of nerve has become a failure of vision." If Mountaineering consisted entirely of such flowery passages, it would be accurate to refer to King's "failure of vision," but his attempt to reconcile drama and architecture, eruptive volcano and comforting suburban hearth, fluidity and stasis, is more concerned with spiritual than with physical vision and form.

King's search for meaning in mountainous landscape is, naturally enough, structured along the concentric lines of a topographic map. The ascension of Mount Tyndall, Mount Shasta, and what was erroneously thought Mount Whitney are the three

points of spiritual integration in Mountaineering. Mountains, and especially these three peaks, become platforms for the transcendence of limitation; they become potential reversal points of normal experience. Dante, like Ruskin, was King's travelling companion, and it is to Dante that King looks in his accounts of these searches for spiritual renewal.

King's first description of a climb is that of Mount Tyndall, and the geologist loses no opportunity to make connections between his ascent and that of Dante in the Purgatorio. Like Dante's pilgrimage, King's is a penetration of "Terra Incognita," and just as Dante looked at the white Celestial Rose of Divine Love, so does King gaze at Mount Tyndall. He writes, "How grand and inviting looked its white form, its untrodden, unknown crest, so high and pure in the clear strong blue! I looked at it as one contemplating the purpose of life." But the view from the top is disillusioning in two respects. First, Mount Tyndall was not the highest peak in America as he had hoped, but several surrounding peaks were higher. Second, the view of Nature from the peak was not that of a redeemer, but rather a destroyer of man. King writes of this aspect in the following passage:

> I have never seen Nature when she seemed so little "Mother Nature" as in this place of rocks and snow, echoes and emptiness. It impresses me as the ruins of some bygone geological period, and no part of the present order, like a specimen of chaos which has defied the finishing hand of Time....looking from this summit with all desire to see everything, the one overmastering feeling is desolation, desolation!

A need to "see everything," yet seeing nothing. King turns to Dante's Inferno in order to capture this impression and describes the mountain slope at night as "the void into which Dante looked through the bottomless gulf of Dis."

If these mythological and literary relationships are not enough, there is still King's description of his return to camp and civilization as an emergence from the kingdom of Death, for what began as an account of the death-defying nature of mountain climbing ends with the camp-fire story of King's associates writing death notices during his absence. In addition, King must have been highly conscious of this symbolic three-day journey. It is ironic, though, that it is camp and not the mountain which represents salvation, and it is an irony which clarifies King's ambivalent attitudes toward society and the wilderness, an ambivalence which he wished to reconcile.

The chapters which separate Mount Tyndall from Mount Shasta are a structural trough, for they consist primarily of genre pictures of the mountain inhabitants, nomadic and semi-nomadic people who illustrated for King what he called the "horrible lesson of social disintegration, of human retrograde." He found a lesson in the mountains, but he struggles against its personal implications throughout Mountaineering, for he could see in these primitives the debilitating effects of their rugged and sublime surroundings. King wished to be influenced by the mountains, yet he did not wish to succumb to them. His reflections on the moral degeneracy of the Sierra inhabitants, however, precipitates doubts about his own scientific abilities.

In the beginning of "Merced Ramblings" he recognizes his desire to unscientifically project himself into the landscape, and he states, "Can it be? I asked myself; has the student of geology so far forgotten his devotion to science? Am I really fallen to the level of a mere nature-lover?" In what amounted to a temporary scientific conversion, an unrecognized foreshadowing of later developments, King re-dedicates himself to geology and miraculously discovers an important fossil in Hell's Hollow, a location which he describes as "a cañon whose profound uninterestingness is quite beyond portrayal." "Here was nadir," he continues, "the snow-capped zenith of my heart banished even from sight." The banishment of heart, however, results in scientific discovery, and, although King does not dare say so now, the implications are that science and emotion are incompatible.

This commitment to geology, though, does not last, for, still uncertain of his role, he emerges from the depths of geological description and again attempts to reintegrate art and science in the narration of his Shasta climbs. Like most of the other sections, this one contains complaints about the lack of human individuality of the Sierra residents. Mountains, unlike people, have individuality, but it is through a limbo of social conformity that King must move toward Shasta. He even has to cross a mythological river, after which, he says, "we dated a new life." King's reaction to Shasta is similar to his reactions to every mountain; he makes it the temporary center of his life. The vista from each peak, however, elicits a unique

feeling although it is based on the same mythological formula. Of the Shasta experience King writes, "When I ask myself to-day what were the sensations on Shasta, they render themselves into three,--geography, shadows, and uplifted isolation." Again, though, it is the descent into the civilized garden and not the ascent into solitude which moves King to his greatest lyricism. For example, he states,

> I always feel a strange renewal of life when I come down from one of these climbs; they are with me points of departure more marked and powerful than I can account for upon any reasonable ground. In spite of any scientific labor or presence of fatigue, the lifeless region, with its savage elements of sky, ice and rock, grasps one's nature, and whether he will or no, compels into a stern, strong accord. Then, as you come again into softer air, and enter the comforting presence of trees, and feel the grass under your feet, one fetter after another seems to unbind from your soul, leaving it free, joyous, grateful.

Thus, not the climb and view by themselves, but the experience after the ascent becomes the central experience for King. It is as if the nineteenth-century pilgrim-geologist has associated the ascent with geological observation, and the burdens which he discards on his descent are the theodolite and the barometer. The joke of Mountaineering is that King can never decide whether literature or geology is the greater burden.

Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada is filled with unintentional irony, but the supreme irony is based on a geographical mistake which has literary and cosmological implications for Clarence King. What should have been the dramatic climax of King's narrative, that is, his ascent of the tallest peak in continental United

States, his imaginative unification of science and art, and his psychological identification with the supremacy for which the mountain stands, turns into a tragi-comic anti-climax in the 1874 edition. He had attempted to climb the peak in 1864 but discovered that the approach he had taken was impossible. He tried again in 1871, this time from a different direction, and the first edition of Mountaineering records his ascent of what he thought was Mount Whitney. This upward journey was accompanied by a storm which Turner and Ruskin would have admired, but King did not realize that this source of florid description would also be the source of scientific embassassment. It becomes a classic case of the scientist as wrong-way Corrigan. In 1873, a year after Mountaineering was first published, two parties ascended the real Mount Whitney and put the lie to King's romantic view of natural fact. King actually climbed Mount Langley, three miles away from Mount Whitney, and he must have felt on hearing the news of his mistake that Thoreau's "solid earth" was dissolving underneath him. The ascensions of the true Mount Whitney forced King into rejecting either literature or geology as false trickery.

When in the 1874 edition King records his third attempt to climb Whitney, his attitude toward Nature, toward science, and toward art has changed drastically. As he recalls his earlier attempts, he thinks of the earth not as an open scripture ready for imaginative interpretation, but as a dense, obscured, and hesitant puzzle which has nothing to reveal. He writes of his

false ascent, "My little granite island was incessantly beaten by breakers of vague, impenetrable cloud, and never once did the true Mount Whitney unveil its crest to my eager eyes. Only one glimpse, and I would have bent my steps northward, restless till the peak was climbed." In imagery which is similar to that favorite Victorian convention, the drifting boat in a sea of chaos, King deplores that he never received that glimpse of truth in 1871. By 1873 the glory and mythology of the landscape had departed from him.

The new edition of Mountaineering is an elegy,whereas the first edition is a celebration. What once had been new and dramatic now is mundane and neutral. As he relates his climb, he notes that "All the sensations of power and tragedy I had invariably felt before on high peaks, were totally forgotten." What had been a range of transcendental light now is "like an opal world, submerged in a sea of dreamy light....no mist, no vagueness, no loss of form nor fading of outline." In short, a hard-edged, unpoetic earth, a world which, according to King, "left no enduring impression."

King concludes his rejection of inaccurate poetry and mythology and acceptance of non-poetic science by trying to convince himself of the falsity of Ruskin's or of an Indian's conception of Nature and of the true liberating aspects of modernism. He now plays Sancho Panza to his former Quixotic self, and mountains are no longer Mambrino's helmet but accumulations of granite. King ends by relating an anecdote of confrontation between his

disillusioned self and a myth-filled Indian. It deserves full quotation:

> This was the drift of my revery as I lay basking on the hot sands of Inyo, realizing fully the geological history and hard, materialistic reality of Mount Whitney. its mineral nature, its chemistry; yet archaic impulse even then held me, and the gaunt, gray old Indian who came slowly toward me must have felt my condition, for he crouched beside me and silently fixed his hawk eye upon the peak.
>
> At last he drew an arrow, sighted along its straight shaft, bringing the obsidian head to bear on Mount Whitney, and in strange fragments of language told me that the peak was an old, old man, who watched this valley and cared for the Indians, but who shook the country with earthquakes to punish the whites for injustice toward his tribe.
>
> I looked at his whitened hair and keen, black eye. I watched the spare, bronze face, upon which was written the burden of a hundred dark and gloomy superstitions; and as he trudged away across the sands I could but feel the liberating power of modern culture, which unfetters us from the more than iron bands of self-made myths. My mood vanished with the savage, and I saw the great peak only as it really is--a splendid mass of granite 14,887 feet high, ice-chiselled and storm-tinted; a great monolith left standing amid the ruins of a bygone geological empire.

King chose to create a Great Divide between poetry and science, typology and topography, and he decided to follow accuracy rather than impression, to pick up his formerly burdensome instruments; but Mount Whitney received its revenge at the expense of Clarence King, geologist, for the final irony in this scientific tragi-comedy is that the peak is not 14,887 feet at all, but 14,494.

Bibliographical Note

GENERAL

Essential reading for the study of literature and geology would be Marjorie Hope Nicolson's Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory (1959), which is primarily on the influence of geological theories on English pre-Romantic poets, and M. H. Abrams' Natural Supernaturalism (1971)-- especially the chapter "The Theodicy of the Landscape." Of a more specific nature, but equally suggestive, is Cecil J. Schneer's anthology Toward a History of Geology (1969), Proceedings of the New Hampshire Inter-Disciplinary Conference on the History of Geology. Anyone interested in the subject should not overlook John Conron's excellent introductory chapters and bibliography in his The American Landscape.

The following articles either directly or indirectly treat the subject of science and literature: Robert C. Bredeson, "Landscape Description in Nineteenth-Century American Travel Literature," American Quarterly (1968); David Edge, "Technological Metaphors and Social Control," New Literary History (1971); Frank D. McConnell, "Romanticism, Language, Waste: A Reflection on Poetics and Disaster," Bucknell Review (1972); Jerome R. Rovetz, "Tradedy in the History of Science," in Changing Perspectives in the History of Science (1973), Mikuláš Teich and Robert Young, eds.; and Martin J. S. Rudwick, "The Strategy of Lyell's Principles of Geology," Isis (1970).

CLARENCE KING

The most accessible edition of Mountaineering is James M. Shebl's paperback reprint of the 1872 edition. Other editions are edited by Thurman Wilkins and Francis P. Farquhar. Thurman Wilkins' biography of King contains a complete bibliography up to 1958. Other references to King's pathetic life can be found in Farquhar's History of the Sierra Nevada (1965) and in the fascinating book by William H. Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire (1966). Some interesting comments on King are in Wallace Stegner's Beyond the 100th Meridian (1953), where Stegner condemns King for being a

spineless Eastern snob, and in Howard Mumford Jones' O Strange New World (1952), where the author calls Mountaineering "stoic in tone"--two reactions with which I cannot agree. Of course, the most complete analysis of Mountaineering as literature has been in Roger B. Stein's John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900 (1967).